

Daybreak at the Domino

Brazilian Soldiers Stage a Raid in Revenge

RIO DE JANEIRO.

To Brazilians, it was the sort of incident they've seen before and likely will see again. But to North Americans, it was an indication of Latin America's frequently cavalier regard for civil authority—the kind of problem that makes Latin governments unstable.

On the night of Feb. 1, with the temperature at its normal 95 and air conditioners humming all over the city, I inspected what remained of the Domino Club, a well-known Rio "clap joint." The time was 5 a.m. The Domino was a shell, a dark room full of bullet holes and broken glass.

The doorman was dead, cut down by gunfire as he fled. The bartender was hospitalized with bullet wounds in the head. Several other patrons were wounded. Some observers said another man was dead, but the bodies were removed so quickly no one was sure.

Was this a raid by "lawless elements"? Hardly. The newspaper Correio Da Manha called the incident a "military operation," and explained: "A detachment of paratroopers under the command of two lieutenants sealed off a street in order to assault (the) night club with machine guns, hand grenades, and tear gas."

The attack, carried out by uniformed paratroopers wearing black greasepaint on their faces, was simply a matter of vengeance.

Several weeks ago, an army sergeant was beaten to death at the Domino, after a dispute over the size of his bill. A few days later, an army captain stopped in the club and said the army intended to even the score. He was severely beaten by the doorman and several others. About 10 days passed; then the army evened the score.

When I arrived at the scene the street was cordoned off at both ends by soldiers with fixed bayonets and machine guns. Several bodies—some dead, others still alive—were being put into trucks. A large crowd hovered around the entrance to the Domino.

The sky was getting light. Several blocks away, a few early-risers already were out on Copacabana Beach. In the middle of Rua Carvalho de Mendonca, where the body of the doorman had lain, was a large smear of blood and some trampled flowers. Several cars were ridden with bullet holes.

On the sidewalk in front of the Domino was a hand grenade. Had it gone off inside the club, the grenade could have killed many revelers. But even without the grenade, it's a wonder more people weren't slain.

The soldiers had burst through the door, ordered everybody to lie down on the floor, and sprayed the entire room with machine-gun fire. The owner, the main target of the raid, escaped into another night club. One patron grabbed a soldier's weapon and shot him with it. Another patron fled, then pulled a pistol and wounded one of the pursuing soldiers.

The Rio police were not in on the Domino attack. They have problems of their own. In recent weeks, the newspapers have reported a half-dozen cases of police killing vagrants and beggars, then dumping the bodies into nearby rivers that flow into Guanabara Bay.

So far, two policemen have been arrested. One confessed, and officials said both men would be dismissed from the force. The newspaper Jornal do Brasil called for an immediate investigation, saying that policemen are suspected of "summarily applying the death penalty to individuals considered bad elements."

It was also pointed out that policemen dismissed from the force often go to work

Hunter S. Thompson, author of this account, is a National Observer special correspondent.

as doormen or bouncers for clubs like the Domino. Brazilian night clubs are not known for patience or generosity. A "balerina" named Maria, fired from a club in a small town near Rio, recently accused the owner of "transforming the backyard of his club into a cemetery."

The girl reported that "customers who cannot pay the bill, or protest the amount, are invited to have a talk with him in the backyard, where they are shot and buried." The police promised to investigate.

The Domino affair wasn't the first time the Brazilian military has taken

vengeance measures. In 1954, for instance, the armed forces deposed President Getulio Vargas, and later drove him to suicide, after he sent gunmen to liquidate an opposition publisher. The soldiers were upset because the gunmen accidentally killed an air force major instead.

The Army has taken commando-style vengeance on night clubs, too, but the recent incident was the first time anyone had been machine-gunned in the process. Said one club owner afterward: "What am I supposed to do the next time a soldier comes in here? I have to treat him with kid gloves, or they'll come in and shoot me like an animal."

The basic problem is hardly unique to Brazil: Where civil authority is weak and often corrupt, the military gets power by default.

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